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Becoming Constructs in Cyberspace – Version 2.0 of the Afterlife

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Abstract

An immortal digital existence for all is the world that posthumanists envision; whether this be as 'foglets', a human mind controlling a swarm of nanobots, as envisioned by Warren Ellis in *Transmetropolitan* or continually cloned or downloaded into real and artificial bodies as per the future represented by Richard K Morgan in *Altered Carbon*. Some eschew this world altogether seeking a new existence in cyberspace as beings indistinguishable from an artificial intelligence in the manner of the 'ghosts' of Gibson's *Sprawl Trilogy*. Though these solutions are science fiction, the transhumanism movement has members worldwide; Cryogenic institutions are ran wherein the heads and sometimes the entire bodies of clients are kept preserved, waiting for a technological eschaton when they may leave the realm of the dead and once again become conscious. These utopian ideas have more in common with traditional religious notions than the rational exponents of posthumanism would care to admit. Merging with an A.I. instead of Osirification or making a digital avatar instead of the alchemical spiritual body is the contemporary answer to the fear of mortality. Though mostly still fiction, some of the cyberspaces of where these bodies might exist are already present as MMORPG's and unlike the heavens and hells of older religions they are visitable today whilst the original body is still in existence. Science fiction gives an insight into what may come if fictional technologies become real. Where the Book of the Dead leaves off at the moment of Osirification these texts pose the question: what next? Do the lives of those who get what they wished for in fiction offer us relevant insights in our quest for transhumanism?

Key Words: A.I., cyberpunk, cyberspace, embodiment, religion, science fiction, transhumanism. techno-fetishism.

1. Introduction – Searching for an Afterlife

The idea of posthumanism and the transhuman movements are concerned with using technological means to become “more than human”. Both words for the movement imply the idea of moving beyond and transcending being human. Humanity+, formerly the World Transhumanist Association states its objectives as:

1. to support discussion and public awareness of emerging technologies;

2. to defend the right of individuals in free and democratic societies to adopt technologies that expand human capacities;
3. to anticipate and propose solutions for the potential consequences of emerging technologies;
4. to actively encourage and support the development of emerging technologies judged to have sufficiently probable positive benefit.¹

Essentially, if it is broken, and we can fix it, we should. However transhumanism is not merely about cochlea implants allowing the deaf to hear again, or the mind-machine interfaces currently developed by organisations such as the 'Braingate research team.'² The braingate team have made direct brain and machine interaction possible. The BrainGate2 Neural Interface System allows people with extensive spinal cord injuries to take a sip of a drink with the aid of a robotic arm that is controlled by them. However, no matter how much it is possible to repair sustained injuries, the body will eventually wind down. Sooner or later organs fail, diseases infect the body and then there is the natural ageing process. The actual culprit is then death that somehow needs to be defeated.

There are several ideas as to how technology can be used to accomplish the goal of living forever. The pyramid texts and the book of the opening of the mouth ceremony date to the 4th dynasty in Egypt, that is between 2575-2467 BCE. The idea behind these texts is that through various incantations and the use of symbols, one portion of the soul of the deceased can be assisted to survive in the afterlife. A statue, or other effigy was fed and given water allowing the dead soul to gain nourishment and thus continue existing.³ The deceased themselves were also prepared by memorising incantations and hymns to various guardians in the underworld, the existence of which was taken for granted. The Book of the Dead and the Book of the opening of the mouth contains ritual actions to be performed by the priests, spells to be spoken and descriptions of what the deceased is to expect to happen in the afterlife. All this would guarantee the soul to stay alive and regain a new, non-material body.⁴

Presently, new technological means of securing a life after death have been suggested. Though the means are different, some of the methods and concepts share an uncanny resemblance to the earliest attempts. Instead of mummification, the brain, sometimes the entire body is cryogenically preserved. This is done since the information stored in the brain is the self/persona and if the technology to download that into an alternative storage component or copy it into a new brain is not available at the time of death, then it needs to be preserved until the technology does exist.⁵ Though there is criticism against Transhumanism, to the extent of it being called the "worlds most dangerous idea",⁶ it is not much different from any dualistic belief system that deals with ideas regarding life after death and how to secure it.

As pointed out in Nick Bostrom's article *A History of Transhumanist Thought* we have always sought means to transcend the human condition, from palaeolithic times through the middle ages up to the present. The technologies of past and contemporary religions for securing the afterlife are at the moment as unproven as the potential western scientific technological means. There is no way of knowing without a doubt that transferal into a simulation is feasible and will work, there is simply the faith and hope that it will.⁷ The wisdom traditions are not replete with information regarding what the world will look like when everyone has attained the posthuman condition described as attainable in their dogma, whether this be an existence in a transmaterial immortal body, or existing in a parallel underworld universe. Modern literature that engages with the posthuman condition on the other hand delights in a form of projective anachronism.

2. Who would want to life forever?

Transhumanism owes as much to the dualistic, escapist notions of the western obsession with the immanence of the apocalypse as it does to science fiction texts.⁸ Kurzweil in *The singularity is near* and *The age of spiritual machines* offers a general overview of how accelerating technology will lead to posthumanity emerging and the technological information based singularity becoming a reality. His overview clearly echoes Isaac Asimov's the last question (1956).⁹ The story narrates almost the entire lifespan of the Universe, from the creation of the first artificial intelligence to the final heat-death of the universe, and beyond that. The narrative jumps forward millions of years at a time. The A.I. Multivac is shown to evolve between each jump, as are the posthumans living in that time. The posthuman evolution is roughly shown as: Humans, humans with enhancements, designed humans who live for hundreds of years, imperishable posthumans who are downloaded into the A.I. and can freely explore the world and a human-A.I. amalgam condition where the posthumans give up their identity and self to become more than the sum of their parts in the single consciousness of the Universal Multivac that exists in hyperspace. Every jump in Asimov's novel ends with a member of the current generation of posthumans asking the Multivac whether entropy can be reversed. The Multivac solves all other problems, mankind is flourishing, spreading throughout the universe. Energy is abundant. The posthumans even conquer death, though this may not be as desirable as one would think. The posthuman MQ-17J remarks

Immortality exists and we have to take it into account. I admit it has its seamy side, this immortality. The Galactic AC has solved many problems for us, but in solving the problems of

preventing old age and death, it has undone all its other solutions.¹⁰

Each and every mind has its own direct link with the Universal A.I. that exist beyond time and space, and every mind is able to fully fuse with this alien intelligence, passing beyond the confines of the space-time continuity themselves. This allows a final escape when the great universal entropy clock is winding down. The timescale of the novel is unfathomable, stated as ten trillion years. The setting is utopian, with all of postmankinds worries solved and cared for. But there is the constant nagging feeling felt by all the posthumans encountered that there is an end approaching. The end, no matter how distant, will come and this is why they keep asking the Multivac the only question they think matters; “How can entropy be reversed?”¹¹

Existence in the non-dual state of hyperspace, when “Matter and energy had ended and with it, space and time” seems unacceptable and unwanted.¹² Perhaps because this means giving up the individuality and meld. One could at this stage ask why the combined multivac-antropos entity doesn't choose the way of simulated reality as per Moravec's argument.¹³ In the end, the Multivac finds a solution to the problem it was thus far unable to solve and delivers the solution by means of a demonstration.

The narrative ends with the words “Let there be Light (and there was light).” The same sentence that the Elohim of Genesis utters. Asimov's text can be seen as a blueprint for narratives of posthumanity, since almost all other texts can be slotted into its vast timeline as expansions of specific aspects.

3. Digital Minds – Existence as Information

Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* presents a world where the mind can be downloaded, copied and stored and even shared amongst several bodies. The minds are sent through space to inhabit clones, artificial bodies and even bodies that have previously housed other minds. This process is referred to as resleeving, the bodies being the sleeves into which the mind fits. There is still permanent death if the implant that stores the memory is destroyed. There are rich individuals that store their memories remotely via satellite uplinking making sure that even if their implants were destroyed they would survive. One of the great hurdles, the ageing process, is also overcome. Cloning allows the same mind to inhabit an almost identical body over and over again. The story is a murder mystery detective story, where the victim, now in a new sleeve refuses to believe he would have committed suicide and wants his own murder solved.¹⁴

Though physical death is less an issue, the wealth and power that an individual commands still affects the quality of life. Only the rich can afford the best sleeves and thus to not have to go through the growing and ageing process. Life is

otherwise fairly unchanged. There are still criminal elements and mankind does not seem to devote itself to altruistic ends searching for self-betterment. The sleeving technology allows the creation of simulated sleeves in simulated reality. The protagonist, Takeshi Kovacs, is placed in one of these scenarios, at first unaware of the fact he is in a simulation. The reason for this is so that his captors can torture him more efficiently.

Sleeving has a few effects that seem to be logical extrapolations. First, not everyone wishes to be sleeved more than a few times, especially if they cannot afford better than run of the mill sleeves. Second, certain religious denominations are opposed to the technology. In the narrative this is represented by the Catholic Church. Their fear lies in the idea that the mind and soul are not the same thing. The resleeved are seen as soulless simulations and not the real thing. This echoes the well known issue in the research of A.I. that deals with the question whether qualia and self-awareness can be modelled or not. Third, there are those who start to identify more with the various sleeves they have inhabited or completely dis-identify from them all. When being met in virtual reality most will look like their image of themselves, irrespective of current sleeve. Kadmin, a hired hitman looks like a patchwork of ethnicities, genders and people.

Kadmin had freed himself from conventional perceptions of the physical. In an earlier age, he would have been a shaman; here, the centuries of technology had made him more. An electronic demon, a malignant spirit that dwelled in altered carbon and emerged only to possess flesh and wreak havoc.¹⁵

Kadmin might very well be the only real posthuman from the point of view that he has gone beyond the human on more levels than the surface one.

What is shown with most other characters could be paralleled with the idea of the wheel of rebirth present in vedic tantra, gnosticism and vajrayana buddhism. The mind goes from body to body without transcending itself. The difference lies in that the mind construct remembers the past sleeves reminiscent of the past lives. Nigh immortality is not shown to have solved any of the greater issues of the human condition.

4. The Embodied Mind

Warren Ellis' *Transmetropolitan*, is famous for showing a convergence of all possible posthuman cultures and subcultures. The series depicts various levels of cyberneticised humans and posthumans. One of the more interesting sub-plots follows a minor character Ziang Huai. Ziang becomes more and more synthetic as he keeps showing up in the series, dating Channon the secretary of the protagonist, Spider Jerusalem. In the end he undergoes the process to become a foglet, having

his consciousness uploaded into billions of foglet nanobots.¹⁶ The process is shown since Ziang wants his ex-girlfriend to see as his mind is transferred and the inert body is slowly transformed by the countless nanobots stripping it into its nuclei and building more robots. The foglets could be expected to be shown as extremely detached from society since they exist in a state of nigh-omnipresence. A single foglet can instantiate a new series of itself using dust in space if it so wills. The foglet fog can take on any shape and manipulate matter in almost infinite ways due to its minute size.¹⁷ Existence as a foglet strikes Channon as alien. She cannot wrap her mind around why anyone would want to choose to exist as dust. Tico, the foglet that Spider and his secretary Channon interact with, is trying to impress her with why he chose existence as a foglet rather than changing bodies or simply altering his body. Growing tired of his showmanship, Spider remarks: "And this is why I wanted you to meet Tico. He's blunt. He's a showoff. He's rude. He's human."¹⁸

Transmetropolitan also comments on cryogenics. There is a mini-plot showing a woman being awakened from her frozen state, cured of the illness she was trying to escape and set loose in the futuristic city. With no money, everyone she knows long dead and an inability to cope with the Transhumanist culture, she finds herself incapable to fitting in. Instead of a quirky Captain America like anachronism, she ends up in a shelter, almost psychotic from being overwhelmed by the culture. In both cases there is a technological trick that cheats death but doesn't prepare the mind for what is to come.

With the technology to create a posthuman comes the responsibility to know when to use the technology on willing and unwilling subjects. Euthanasia is a topic with many ethical and practical grey-zones. As and when it becomes possible to keep *Altered Carbon* like copies of persons, would their plea for deletion be listened to? Not all posthumans wish to become posthuman. DC Comics' Robotman, television's Steve Austin star of *'The Six Million Dollar Man'*, and several of Gibson's minor characters, especially the Dixie Flatline are involuntary posthumans. In the case of Steve Austin the process to become a cyborg saves his life and leads to a life that he subjectively experiences as pleasant.¹⁹ This is not the case with Gibson's Dixie Flatline. Dixie, or McCoy Pauley was a famous hacker who survived several encounters with A.I. that flatlined him. The hacker has the contents of his mind saved by the Sense/Net corporation unto a ROM. As the construct is read only, when he is accessed at first he has no memory of anything that happened before he was turned on and if turned off again is without continuous memory. Case works around this issue and gives McCoy sequential memory. Being aware of his status as a ROM Personality Matrix his greatest wish becomes to be erased, which Case obliges him with after the main events.²⁰ Similarly Neuromancer the A.I. is able to create constructs existing in a simulation. In a

faustian pact he offers Case the option to become one of his simulations "Stay. If your woman is a ghost, she doesn't know it. Neither will you."²¹

Whilst Grant Morrison was writing *Doom Patrol* for DC comics, he made a point of Robotman's strange predicament. A human brain in a robotic body with super strength, speed and endurance, artificially enhanced senses but still removed from the world, experiencing it as mediated. Robotman is depressed and suicidal. He cannot be destroyed. In the last sequence written by Morrison it is also revealed that his biological brain was destroyed at some point and he is completely artificial with only his personality being original.²² Needless to say, Robotman did not choose to have his brain implanted into a robotic frame after his body was destroyed, thus he sees his own existence as suffering.

Not only can things go wrong with the process, leaving you more than human in some respects but less in others, what existence as a posthuman is like might be more than what the candidate bargained for. Continuous memory without the chance to forget or ignore unpleasant memories could make life unbearable. Especially if every detail is remembered. Similarly, if there is the possibility to delete memories, or if the memories are changed, then essentially the change that happens over millions of years could be so vast that no trace of the original entity and its memories will remain.

5. Beyond Heavens and Hells

One thing that is apparent in all the fictional posthumans presented is their humanity. The posthuman has transcended the limitations of the body, what Gibson inspired hackers call the meat. The mind, or whatever cultural signifier is chosen to be used for that which is here signified is left almost intact. Julian Huxley's idea of the posthuman is perhaps closer to the notions of our mind children, the A.I.

I believe in transhumanism: once there are enough people who can truly say that, the human species will be on the threshold of a new kind of existence, as different from ours as ours is from that of Peking man. It will at last be consciously fulfilling its real destiny.²³

Science fiction texts are an extrapolation on trends that are present at the time of their writing. Transhumanism is only the latest in a long series of paradigms that seek to use an existing technological tool to accomplish the transformation of an individual into something that is more than man. The hurdle is that the self is not given up. The current representations of posthumans are recognisably human. Anthropocentrism has long been the bane of western culture. That the technologically transformed beings are recognisable might be a hint that they are

not the true posthumans. If human beings build their own posthuman world it will be recognisable as it is their world, in a different matter. Not very different from how ancient Egyptians saw their posthuman world or, the afterlife in Amenti as consisting of pleasurable existence with slaves, good harvests and plenty of beer. Thus the duality between keeping the status quo, or only removing the bits that are seen as bad needs to be removed for a true posthuman to emerge.

Notes

- ¹ 'Humanity+ Constitution' last modified 11 September 2010, Viewed 3 April 2012, <<http://humanityplus.org/about/constitution/>>
- ² The Braingate research team, Viewed 2012-04-20 <<http://www.braingate2.org/aboutUs.asp#adm>>
- ³ *In the Daily life of the Egyptian Gods*, Meeks, Favard-Meeks and Gosharian argue that Egyptian theology grew out of ancestral worship, thus both the cult of the dead and the cult of the gods would share the same origin.
- ⁴ E.A. Wallis Budge *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd. 1914), 10-24
- ⁵ Merkle RC 'The Molecular Repair of the Brain' Accessed August 2, 2011 <<http://www.merkle.com/cryo/techFeas.html>>
- ⁶ Fukuyama, Francis (September/October 2004). "The world's most dangerous ideas: transhumanism" (reprint). *Foreign Policy* (144): 42–43, Viewed 2012-01-20. <<http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2004/09/01/transhumanism>>
- ⁷ Searle's Chinese Room argument is in fact based on the notion that only brains are capable running the software that is self-awareness.
- ⁸ David F Noble argues convincingly and extensively in *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* () about how the western, Christian quest for redemption and the reclaiming of Eden
- ⁹ Isaac Asimov, 'The last Question' Last modified 2007, Viewed 4 January, 2011 <http://www.multivax.com/last_question.html>
- ¹⁰ *ibid*
- ¹¹ *ibid*
- ¹² *ibid*
- ¹³ Nick Bostrom's article 'Are you Living in a Computer Simulation' in *Philosophical Quarterly* (2003) Vol. 53, No. 211, pp. 243-255 discusses this issue in greater detail. For The original argument by Moravec see 'Simulation, Consciousness, Existence' <<http://www.frc.ri.cmu.edu/~hpm/project.archive/general.articles/1998/SimConEx.98.html>>
- ¹⁴ Richard Morgan, *Altered Carbon*, (London, Orion Publishing Group 2004) 343
- ¹⁵ Morgan, *Altered Carbon*
- ¹⁶ Foglets are a cyborg version of a utility fog, which in turn is a collection of countless microscopic robots.
- ¹⁷ *What I want to be when I grow up is a Cloud*, by Storrs Hall gives further insight into the transhumanist view of existence as foglets. Published on KurzweilAI.net July 6, 2001, Viewed 2011-07-09 <<http://www.kurzweilai.net/what-i-want-to-be-when-i-grow-up-is-a-cloud>>
- ¹⁸ Warren Elis, *Transmetropolitan Vol 1*, 'Boyfriend Is a Virus', (Vertigo, March 17, 2009)
- ¹⁹ Harvey Bennet, (Prod), *The Six Million Dollar Man*, Television Series, ABC Network Jan 18, 1974
- ²⁰ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London, Harper Collins Ltd. 1995)
- ²¹ Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 289
- ²² Grant Morrison, *Doom Patrol : Planet Love* (collects #58-63 and Doom Force #1, trade paper back (Titan Books Ltd, 2009)
- ²³ Julian Huxley, Transhumanism, In *New Bottles for New Wine* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), pp. 13-17